



# **Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy**

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## Summary

Al Qaeda (AQ) has evolved into a significantly different terrorist organization than the one that perpetrated the September 11, 2001, attacks. At the time, Al Qaeda was composed mostly of a core cadre of veterans of the Afghan insurgency against the Soviets, with a centralized leadership structure, made up mostly of Egyptians. Most of the organization's plots either emanated from the top or were approved by the leadership. Some analysts describe pre-9/11 Al Qaeda as akin to a corporation, with Osama Bin Laden acting as an agile Chief Executive Officer issuing orders and soliciting ideas from subordinates.

Some would argue that the Al Qaeda of that period no longer exists. Out of necessity, due to pressures from the security community, in the ensuing years it has transformed into a diffuse global network and philosophical movement composed of dispersed nodes with varying degrees of independence. The core leadership, headed by Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, is thought to live in the mountainous tribal belt of northwest Pakistan, where it continues to train operatives, recruit, and disseminate propaganda. But Al Qaeda franchises or affiliated groups active in countries such as Yemen and Somalia now represent critical power centers in the larger movement. Some affiliates receive money, training, and weapons; others look to the core leadership in Pakistan for strategic guidance, theological justification, and a larger narrative of global struggle. Over the past year senior government officials have assessed the trajectory of Al Qaeda to be "less centralized command and control, (with) no clear center of gravity, and likely rising and falling centers of gravity, depending on where the U.S. and the international focus is for that period." While a degraded corporate Al Qaeda may be welcome news to many, a trend has emerged over the past few years that some view as more difficult to detect, if not potentially more lethal.

The Al Qaeda network today also comprises semi-autonomous or self radicalized actors, who often have only peripheral or ephemeral ties to either the core cadre in Pakistan or affiliated groups elsewhere. According to U.S. officials Al Qaeda cells and associates are located in over 70 countries. Sometimes these individuals never leave their home country but are radicalized with the assistance of others who have traveled abroad for training and indoctrination through the use of modern technologies. In many ways, the dispersion of Al Qaeda affiliates fits into the larger strategy of Bin Laden and his associates. They have sought to serve as the vanguard of a religious movement that inspires Muslims and other individuals aspiring to join a jihadi movement to help establish a global caliphate through violent means. The name "Qaeda" means "base" or "foundation," upon which its members hope to build a robust, geographically-diverse network.

Understanding the origins of Al Qaeda, its goals, current activities, and prospective future pursuits is key to developing sound U.S. strategies, policies, and programs. Appreciating the adaptive nature of Al Qaeda as a movement and the ongoing threat it projects onto U.S. global security interests assists in many facets of the national security enterprise; including, securing the homeland, congressional legislative process and oversight, alignment of executive branch resources and coordination efforts, and prioritization of foreign assistance.

The focus of this report is on the history of Al Qaeda, actions and capabilities of the organization and non-aligned entities, and an analysis of select regional Al Qaeda affiliates. This report may be updated as events warrant.

## Contents

Background .....	1
Origins of Al Qaeda .....	3
The Threat Unfolds .....	5
Afghanistan .....	6
Pakistan .....	7
Background and Assessment .....	7
Implications for U.S. Policy .....	9
Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) .....	10
Background and Threat Assessment .....	10
Implications for U.S. Policy .....	11
Al Qaeda in Iraq.....	13
Background and Threat Assessment .....	13
Implications for U.S. Policy .....	14
North Africa/Sahel: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).....	14
Background and Threat Assessment .....	14
Algeria.....	15
The Sahel.....	16
Implications for U.S. Policy .....	17
East Africa .....	18
Background and Threat Assessment .....	18
Somalia: Safe Haven for Terrorist Groups?.....	18
The Islamic Courts Union, Al Shabaab.....	19
The Leadership of Al Shabaab.....	20
Implications for U.S. Policy .....	20
Al Qaeda and Radical Islamist Groups in Southeast Asia.....	22
Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiya.....	22
Suspected Al Qaeda Links to JI Splinter Cells .....	24
The Abu Sayyaf Group.....	25
Implications for U.S. Policy .....	25
Al Qaeda's Global Strategy and Long Term Policy Implications .....	27

## Contacts

Author Contact Information .....	29
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## Background<sup>1</sup>

While Al Qaeda has transformed in recent years, its strategic objectives remain the same. Osama Bin Laden and his associates' desire to attack the United States and its interests and citizens abroad have not abated. In an August 2009 speech, the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism stated that "Al Qaeda has proven to be adaptive and highly resilient and remains the most serious terrorist threat we face as a nation."<sup>2</sup> Before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee in September 2009, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that Al Qaeda's core is "actively engaged in operational plotting and continues recruiting, training, and transporting operatives, to include individuals from Western Europe and North America."<sup>3</sup>

Due in large part to the actions of the U.S. government, "corporate" Al Qaeda, reportedly located in Pakistan, is under tremendous pressure. U.S. military and intelligence operations appear to have degraded the core's capacity for conducting large catastrophic operations similar to the attacks of September 11, 2001. During the 2009 Annual Threat Assessment hearing in front of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Dennis C. Blair, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) stated that Al Qaeda "today is less capable and effective than it was a year ago."<sup>4</sup> At the time many analysts suggested this lack of corporate Al Qaeda planning and operational execution capability was due to the significant leadership losses the movement has suffered during the past 24 months. The Obama Administration launched a total of 39 missile strikes from drone aircraft into Pakistan from the beginning of 2009 until the end of September; the Bush Administration launched 36 such strikes in 2008.<sup>5</sup> Those attacks killed 13 senior Al Qaeda leaders, including Khalid Habib, Abu Laith al Libi, Abu Khabab al-Masri, and Usama al-Kini.<sup>6</sup> According to DNI Blair, the loss of so many top commanders in such a short period has made it difficult for the organization to find replacements with equal levels of operational experience. However, during the 2010 Annual Threat Assessment to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence the DNI further explained that "until counterterrorism pressure on Al Qaeda's place of refuge, key lieutenants, and operative cadre outpaces the group's ability to recover, Al Qaeda will retain its capability to mount an attack."

While it appears that many terrorist cells located throughout the world are affiliating their actions with the organization, the Al Qaeda movement is simultaneously facing perhaps a longer term challenge in the form of a legitimacy crisis within Muslim communities. In the words of DNI Blair, the United States has "seen notable progress in Muslim opinion turning against terrorist groups like Al Qaeda."<sup>7</sup> Muslim populations, some of whom showed approval of Al Qaeda's

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by John Rollins, Specialist in Terrorism and National Security, ext. 7-5529, and Seth Rosen, Research Associate.

<sup>2</sup> "Remarks by John O. Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism," speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 6, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> "Testimony of Michael Leiter, Director of National Counterterrorism Center, hearing 'Eight Years After 9/11: Confronting the Terrorist Threat to the Homeland,'" before the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, September 30, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> "Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," Dennis C. Blair, Director of National Intelligence, February 12, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Karen DeYoung and Walter Pincus, "Success Against al-Qaeda Cited," *The Washington Post*, September 30, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Roggio, "US Airstrikes Alone Cannot Defeat al Qaeda," *The Long War Journal*, September 23, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> "Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," Dennis (continued...)

actions in the wake of the invasion of Iraq, appear to have turned against the extremist movement. The killing of innocent Muslims in Iraq, as well as the bombing of three hotels in Amman, Jordan, in November 2005, appears to have produced a significant backlash against the movement. For example, a poll conducted by Jordan University's Center for Strategic Studies a month after the Amman bombings showed that only 20% of the population viewed Al Qaeda as a "legitimate resistance group" – down from 67% in 2004.<sup>8</sup> Some would argue that the theological interpretations, religious justifications, and strategic aspirations that underpin Al Qaeda's actions are all under attack from credible sources. Over the past two years, several prominent religious scholars and former Al Qaeda associates—including Saudi Sheikh Salman al-Ouda and Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, one of Al Qaeda's original spiritual leaders—have spoken out against the movement's indiscriminate tactics and ideology. However, in the face of disapproval by a majority of the Muslim community, Al Qaeda continues to attract potential recruits and possess an ability to influence and support global organizations with similar goals and philosophical objectives. DNI Blair recently noted the following;

Al Qaida will continue its efforts to encourage key regional affiliates and jihadist networks to pursue a global agenda. A few Al Qaida regional affiliates and jihadist networks have exhibited an intent or capability to attack inside the Homeland. Some regional nodes and allies have grown in strength and independence over the last two years and have begun to project operationally outside their regions.<sup>9</sup>

Though Al Qaeda affiliated groups have perpetrated numerous deadly terrorist attacks over the past two years, the core in Pakistan has demonstrated limited operational effectiveness in that time span. Because of the loss of top commanders and continued pressure from U.S. intelligence activities and foreign partners, the Al Qaeda core has been unable to orchestrate many spectacular attacks. Analysts routinely point to only two such attacks occurring in 2008: the suicide attack on the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, with a Saudi suicide bomber, and the bombing of the Marriott hotel in Islamabad.<sup>10</sup> The core organization's apparent inability to commit large-scale attacks has led some analysts to question the relevancy, capabilities, and competency of the group.<sup>11</sup> There is also some evidence that the Al Qaeda core, at times, struggles to retain recruits and raise funds. In June 2009, the group's leader in Afghanistan, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, released an audio message stating that Al Qaeda members in that country were short of food, weapons, and other supplies.<sup>12</sup>

In light of the numerous smaller scale attempted terrorist attacks throughout 2009, and the most recent events directed at U.S. interests of the November shootings at Ft. Hood, Texas, and the

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C. Blair, Director of National Intelligence, February 12, 2009. For the 2010 Threat Assessment hearing in front of the Committee, the DNI went on to state "'Muslim support for violent extremism did not change significantly in 2009 and remains a minority view, according to polls of large Muslim populations conducted on behalf of Gallup and Pew. On average, two-thirds of Muslims in such populations say that attacks in which civilians are targeted cannot be justified at all.'

<sup>8</sup> Murad Batal Al-Shishani, "Jordanian Poll Indicates Erosion of Public Support for al-Qaeda," *Terrorism Focus*, Vol. 3, No. 6, February 14, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> "Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," Dennis C. Blair, Director of National Intelligence, February 2, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Sandee, "Core Al-Qaida in 2008: Review," *The NEFA Foundation*, April 8, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> See comments of Brynjar Lia, an al Qaeda expert, in Ian Black and Richard Norton-Taylor, "Al-Qaida Faces Recruitment Crisis, Anti-terrorism Experts Say," *The Guardian*, September 10, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> William Maclean, "Al-Qaida's Money Trouble," *Reuters*, June 15, 2009.

December bombing attempt aboard a U.S. airliner, some analysts view these operations as evidence that the organization and its affiliates are no longer capable of launching a large-scale catastrophic terrorist attack directed at U.S. interests. These analysts suggest that recent acts are an acknowledgment that the destructive capabilities of corporate Al Qaeda and those individuals with similar philosophical goals are actually on the decline and are indicative of an organization desperate to prove its continued viability. Others, however, suggest that this recent trend may be indicative of an organization becoming more select and sophisticated in the operations it pursues and adopting a model of encouraging affiliates and sympathizers to undertake smaller scale acts to divert international attention and resources away from planning and preparations for larger, more catastrophic, attacks. Recognition of a more aggressive and resilient enemy may have been enunciated in a January 20, 2010, statement by the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) before Senate Judiciary Committee, “as the Christmas day attempted bombing illustrates, the threats we face are becoming more diverse and more dangerous with each passing day.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in apparent acknowledgement that current U.S. policies and programs may not currently be aligned to meet ongoing threats posed by Al Qaeda, Daniel Benjamin, Coordinator for the State Department’s Office of Counterterrorism, stated in January 2010 “the events of Christmas demonstrated that some of the understandings that underlay how we organized ourselves for counterterrorism need updating.” Benjamin went on to state “other events in the latter half of 2009 have also underscored how some of our operating assumptions were no longer adequate.”

## Origins of Al Qaeda<sup>14</sup>

The primary founder of Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, was born in July 1957, the 17<sup>th</sup> of 20 sons of a Saudi construction magnate of Yemeni origin. Most Saudis are conservative Sunni Muslims, and Bin Laden appears to have adopted militant Islamist views while studying at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. There he studied Islam under Muhammad Qutb, brother of Sayyid Qutb, the key ideologue of a major Sunni Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>15</sup> Another of Bin Laden’s instructors was Abdullah al Azzam, a major figure in the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Azzam is identified by some experts as the intellectual architect of the *jihad* against the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and ultimately of Al Qaeda itself; he cast the Soviet invasion as an attempted conquest by a non-Muslim power of sacred Muslim territory and people.<sup>16</sup>

Bin Laden went to Afghanistan shortly after the December 1979 Soviet invasion, joining Azzam there. He reportedly used some of his personal funds to establish himself as a donor to the Afghan *mujahedin* and a recruiter of Arab and other Islamic volunteers for the war.<sup>17</sup> In 1984, Azzam and

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<sup>13</sup> Testimony of Robert Mueller, “Securing America’s Safety: Improving the Effectiveness of Anti-Terrorism Tools and Inter-Agency Communication” before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, January 20, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Prepared by Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs.

<sup>15</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 in Egypt, and it has since spawned numerous Islamist movements throughout the region, some as branches of the Brotherhood, others with new names. For example, the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas traces its roots to the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1966, Sayyid Qutb was tried and executed for treason for his opposition to the government of Egyptian President Gamal Abd al Nasser.

<sup>16</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda*. Columbia University Press, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> The September 11 Commission report says that U.S. officials obtained information in 2000 indicating that bin Laden received \$1 million per year from his family from 1970 (two years after his father’s death) until 1994, when his citizenship was revoked by the Saudi government. *Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon* (continued...)

bin Laden structured this assistance by establishing a network of recruiting and fund-raising offices in the Arab world, Europe, and the United States. That network was called the *Maktab al Khidamat* (Services Office), also known as *Al Khifah*; many experts consider the *Maktab* to be the organizational forerunner of Al Qaeda. Another major figure who utilized the *Maktab* network to recruit for the anti-Soviet *jihad* was Umar Abd al Rahman (also known as “the blind shaykh”), the spiritual leader of radical Egyptian Islamist group Al Jihad. Bin Laden apparently also fought in the anti-Soviet war, participating in a 1986 battle in Jalalabad and, more notably, a 1987 frontal assault by foreign volunteers against Soviet armor. Bin Laden has said he was exposed to a Soviet chemical attack and slightly injured in that battle.<sup>18</sup>

During this period, most U.S. officials perceived the volunteers as positive contributors to the effort to expel Soviet forces from Afghanistan, and U.S. officials made no apparent effort to stop the recruitment of the non-Afghan volunteers for the war. U.S. officials have repeatedly denied that the United States directly supported the non-Afghan volunteers.<sup>19</sup> The United States did covertly finance (about \$3 billion during 1981-1991) and arm (via Pakistan) the Afghan *mujahedin* factions, particularly the Islamic fundamentalist Afghan factions, fighting Soviet forces. By almost all accounts, it was the Afghan *mujahedin* factions, not the Arab volunteer fighters, that were decisive in persuading the Soviet Union to pull out of Afghanistan. During this period, Bin Laden, Azzam, and Abd al Rahman were not known to have openly advocated, undertaken, or planned any direct attacks against the United States, although they all were critical of U.S. support for Israel in the Middle East.

In 1988, toward the end of the Soviet occupation, Bin Laden, Azzam, and other associates began contemplating how, and to what end, the Islamist volunteer network they had organized could be utilized. U.S. intelligence estimates of the size of that network was between 10,000 and 20,000; however, not all of these necessarily supported or participated in Al Qaeda terrorist activities.<sup>20</sup> Azzam apparently wanted this “Al Qaeda” (Arabic for “the base”) organization—as they began terming the organization in 1988—to become an Islamic “rapid reaction force,” available to intervene wherever Muslims were perceived to be threatened. Bin Laden differed with Azzam, hoping instead to dispatch the Al Qaeda activists to their home countries to try to topple secular, pro-Western Arab leaders, such as President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Saudi Arabia’s royal family.

Some attribute the Bin Laden-Azzam differences to the growing influence on Bin Laden of the Egyptians in his inner circle, such as Abd al Rahman, who wanted to use Al Qaeda’s resources to install an Islamic state in Egypt. Another close Egyptian confidant was Ayman al Zawahiri, operational leader of Al Jihad in Egypt. Like Abd al Rahman, Zawahiri had been imprisoned but ultimately acquitted for the October 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and he permanently left Egypt for Afghanistan in 1985. There, he used his medical training to tend to wounded fighters in the anti-Soviet war. In November 1989, Azzam was assassinated, and some allege that Bin Laden might have been responsible for the killing to resolve this power struggle. Following Azzam’s death, Bin Laden gained control of the *Maktab*’s funds and organizational mechanisms. Abd al Rahman came to the United States in 1990 from Sudan and was convicted in

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*the United States*. July 22, 2004. p. 170.

<sup>18</sup> Gunaratna, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Author conversations with officials in the public affairs office of the Central Intelligence Agency. 1993.

<sup>20</sup> *Report of the 9/11 Commission*. p. 67.



October 1995 for terrorist plots related to the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York. Zawahiri stayed with Bin Laden and remains Bin Laden's main strategist today.

## **The Threat Unfolds**

The August 2, 1990, Iraqi invasion of Kuwait apparently turned Bin Laden from a de-facto U.S. ally against the Soviet Union into one of its most active adversaries. Bin Laden had returned home to Saudi Arabia in 1989, after the completion of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan that February. While back home, he lobbied Saudi officials not to host U.S. combat troops to defend Saudi Arabia against an Iraqi invasion, arguing instead for the raising of a "*mujahedin*" army to oust Iraq from Kuwait. His idea was rebuffed by the Saudi leadership as impractical, causing Bin Laden's falling out with the royal family, and 500,000 U.S. troops deployed to Saudi Arabia to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait in "Operation Desert Storm" (January 16 - February 28, 1991). About 6,000 U.S. forces, mainly Air Force, remained in the kingdom during 1991-2003 to conduct operations to contain Iraq. Although the post-1991 U.S. force in Saudi Arabia was relatively small and confined to Saudi military facilities, bin Laden and his followers painted the U.S. forces as occupiers of sacred Islamic ground and the Saudi royal family as facilitator of that "occupation."

In 1991, after his rift with the Saudi leadership, Bin Laden relocated to Sudan, buying property there which he used to host and train Al Qaeda militants—this time, for use against the United States and its interests, as well as for *ji*had operations in the Balkans, Chechnya, Kashmir, and the Philippines. During the early 1990s, he also reportedly funded Saudi Islamist dissidents in London, including Saad Faqih, organized as the "Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA)."<sup>21</sup> Bin Laden himself remained in Sudan until the Sudanese government, under U.S. and Egyptian pressure, expelled him in May 1996; he then returned to Afghanistan and helped the Taliban gain and maintain control of Afghanistan. (The Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996.)

Bin Laden and Zawahiri apparently believed that the only way to bring Islamic regimes to power was to oust from the region the perceived backer of secular regional regimes, the United States. During the 1990s, bin Laden and Zawahiri transformed Al Qaeda into a global threat to U.S. national security, culminating in the September 11, 2001, attacks. By this time, Al Qaeda had become a coalition of factions of radical Islamic groups operating throughout the Muslim world, mostly groups opposing their governments. Cells and associates have been located in over 70 countries, according to U.S. officials.

The pre-September 11 roster of attacks against the United States and U.S. interests that are widely attributed to Al Qaeda included the following:

- In 1992, Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for bombing a hotel in Yemen where 100 U.S. military personnel were awaiting deployment to Somalia for Operation Restore Hope. No one was killed.
- A growing body of information about central figures in the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, particularly the reputed key

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<sup>21</sup> On December 21, 2004, the Treasury Department designated Faqih as a provider of material support to Al Qaeda and Bin Laden, under Executive Order 13324.

bomb maker Ramzi Ahmad Yusuf, suggests possible Al Qaeda involvement. As noted above, Abd al Rahman was convicted for plots related to this attack.

- Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for arming Somali factions who battled U.S. forces there in October 1993, and who killed 18 U.S. special operations forces in Mogadishu in October 1993.
- In June 1995, in Ethiopia, members of Al Qaeda allegedly aided the Egyptian militant Islamic Group in a nearly successful assassination attempt against the visiting Mubarak.
- The four Saudi nationals who confessed to a November 1995 bombing of a U.S. military advisory facility in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, claimed on Saudi television to have been inspired by bin Laden and other radical Islamist leaders. Five Americans were killed in that attack.
- The September 11 Commission report indicated that Al Qaeda might have had a hand in the June 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers complex near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. However, then-director of the FBI Louis Freeh previously attributed that attack primarily to Saudi Shiite dissidents working with Iranian agents. Nineteen U.S. airmen were killed.
- Al Qaeda allegedly was responsible for the August 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed about 300. On August 20, 1998, the United States launched a cruise missile strike against bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan, reportedly missing him by a few hours.
- In December 1999, U.S. and Jordanian authorities separately thwarted related Al Qaeda plots against religious sites in Jordan and apparently against the Los Angeles international airport.
- In October 2000, Al Qaeda activists attacked the U.S.S. Cole in a ship-borne suicide bombing while the Cole was docked the harbor of Aden, Yemen. The ship was damaged and 17 sailors were killed.

## **Afghanistan<sup>22</sup>**

Although Afghanistan was the main base for Al Qaeda leadership at the time of the September 11 attacks, after eight years of U.S.-led efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, Al Qaeda is more a facilitator of the insurgency in Afghanistan than an active participant. U.S. National Security Adviser James Jones said on *CNN* on October 4, 2009, that the "maximum estimate" of Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan itself is less than 100, with no bases there.<sup>23</sup> This assessment, if accurate, would suggest that any Al Qaeda planning for global attacks likely does not emanate from within Afghanistan.

U.S. and ISAF Commanding General Stanley McChrystal's August 30, 2009, "initial assessment," of the situation in Afghanistan appears to back the Jones view. According to the McChrystal report, "Most insurgent fighters are Afghans....They are aided by foreign

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<sup>22</sup> Prepared by Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs.

<sup>23</sup> *CNN*, "State of the Union" program. October 4, 2009.

fighters...[who] provide materiel, expertise, and ideological commitment.”<sup>24</sup> At another point in the report, McChrystal assessed that “Al Qaeda and associated movements based in Pakistan channel foreign fighters, suicide bombers, and technical assistance into Afghanistan, and offer ideological motivation, training, and financial support.” U.S. military commanders in Afghanistan have, in the past, said that only small numbers of Al Qaeda members—including Arabs, Uzbeks, and Chechens—have been captured or killed in battles in Afghanistan, according to U.S. commanders. The McChrystal report said that a major Afghan insurgent group - the network of Jalaluddin Haqqani and Siraj Haqqani (his son), has a “close association with Al Qaeda and other Pakistan-based insurgent groups.”<sup>25</sup> The Haqqani network is active in Khost, Paktia, and Paktika Provinces, all in eastern Afghanistan, and have reportedly been responsible for some major bombings in Kabul city. However, the Haqqani network is not known to have global ambitions or to donate its manpower or resources to any broader Al Qaeda objectives.

The main insurgent group operating in Afghanistan is the Taliban movement that ran Afghanistan during 1996-2001, and which allowed Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda organization free reign in Afghanistan. Its leader, Mullah Umar, and many of his top advisers from their time in power remain at large and are trying to run their insurgency from safe havens in Pakistan. Afghan officials have, on occasion, asserted that Umar and other senior Taliban figures are based in or around the city of Quetta, thus accounting for the term usually applied to Umar and his aides: the “Quetta Shura Taliban” (QST). However, several expert assessments say that Umar and the Taliban may be distancing themselves from Al Qaeda because close relations with that organization reduce Taliban popularity with Afghan citizens.<sup>26</sup>

Another major insurgent faction is the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) of ex-mujahedin party leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. HIG has been designated by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. HIG may obtain materiel support from Al Qaeda but Hekmatyar has been a major Afghan faction leader since he was an Islamist student leader at Kabul University in the 1960s, and his focus is almost entirely on Afghan politics, not global terrorism. At the same time, about 40 members of the 249 seat Afghan National Assembly are members of Hezb-e-Islami who have given up any insurgent activities and sworn allegiance to the Afghan constitution. U.S. and Afghan officials have said that there have been talks between Hekmatyar’s representatives and those of the Afghan government about possible reconciliation, although Hekmatyar’s statements in 2009 indicated that he would continue his fight until foreign troops leave Afghanistan.

## **Pakistan**<sup>27</sup>

### **Background and Assessment**

U.S. officials remain concerned that Al Qaeda terrorists operate with impunity on Pakistani territory, and that the group appears to have increased its influence among the myriad Islamist militant groups operating along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, as well as in the densely

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<sup>24</sup> Text available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092100110.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 2-6.

<sup>26</sup> Joshua Partlow, “In Afghanistan, Taliban Surpasses Al Qaeda,” *Washington Post*, November 11, 2009. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/10/AR2009111019644.html>

<sup>27</sup> Prepared by Alan Kronstadt, Specialist in South Asian Affairs.

populated Punjab province. Al Qaeda forces that fled Afghanistan with their Taliban supporters remain active in Pakistan and reportedly have extensive, mutually supportive links with indigenous Pakistani terrorist groups that conduct anti-Western and anti-India attacks.<sup>28</sup> Al Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden and his lieutenant, Egyptian Islamist radical Ayman al-Zawahri, are believed to be hiding in northwestern Pakistan, along with most other senior operatives.<sup>29</sup> Al Qaeda leaders have issued statements encouraging Pakistani Muslims to “resist” the American “occupiers” in Pakistan (and Afghanistan), and to fight against Pakistan’s “U.S.-allied politicians and officers.”<sup>30</sup> Al Qaeda is widely believed to maintain camps in western Pakistan where foreign extremists receive training in terrorist operations. By one account, up to 150 Westerners went to western Pakistan to receive terrorism training in 2009. As pressure has mounted on Al Qaeda in western Pakistan in the latter half of 2009, these camps may have become smaller and more mobile.<sup>31</sup>

A 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland concluded that Al Qaeda “has protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including a safehaven in [Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas], operational lieutenants, and its top leadership.”<sup>32</sup> In March 2009, the Obama Administration declared that the “core goal” of the United States should be to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan.” The President continues to assert that Al Qaeda represents the top-most threat to U.S. security.<sup>33</sup> While taking questions from senior Pakistani journalists during an October visit to Pakistan, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offered a pointed expression of U.S. concerns that some elements of official Pakistan maintain sympathy for most-wanted Islamist terrorists:

Al Qaeda has had safe haven in Pakistan since 2002. I find it hard to believe that nobody in [the Pakistani] government knows where they are and couldn’t get them if they really wanted to. And maybe that’s the case. Maybe they’re not gettable. ... I don’t know what the reasons are that Al Qaeda has safe haven in your country, but let’s explore it and let’s try to be honest about it and figure out what we can do.<sup>34</sup>

Pakistani officials are resentful of such suggestions. Islamabad reportedly has remanded to U.S. custody roughly 500 Al Qaeda fugitives since 2001, including several senior alleged operatives. Despite some clear successes in disrupting extremist networks in Pakistan, Al Qaeda has for many years been resurgent on Pakistani territory, with anti-U.S. terrorists appearing to have benefitted from what some analysts have called a Pakistani policy of appeasement in western tribal areas near the Afghan border. Some Pakistani and Western security officials have seen

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<sup>28</sup> During a December 2009 visit to Islamabad, U.S. Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen asserted that over the past 12-24 months Pakistan-based terrorist groups including Al Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammed have grown “much closer” and are “working much more closely together” (Department of Defense Press Release, “JCS Speech: Pakistan Print Press Interviews with Ambassador Patterson,” December 16, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> “CIA Chief Says Bin Laden in Pakistan,” Reuters, June 11, 2009; “Al Qaeda’s Global Base is Pakistan, Says Petraeus,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 9, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, “Qaeda’s Zawahri Urges Pakistanis to Join Jihad,” Reuters, July 15, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> “Qaeda’s Training Areas in Pakistan Notorious,” *New York Daily News*, September 21, 2009; “Terror Training Camps Smaller, Harder to Target,” Associated Press, November 9, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> See [http://www.dni.gov/press\\_releases/20070717\\_release.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20070717_release.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> See [http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/afghanistan\\_pakistan\\_white\\_paper\\_final.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/afghanistan_pakistan_white_paper_final.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> State Department Press Release, “Roundtable With Senior Pakistani Editors,” October 30, 2009.

Islamabad losing its war against religious militancy and Al Qaeda forces enjoying new areas in which to operate, due in part to the Pakistan Army's poor counterinsurgency capabilities and to the central government's eroded legitimacy.

More recently, however, U.S. officials have lauded late-2009 Pakistani military operations against Al Qaeda- and Taliban-allied militants in western tribal areas; Islamabad has devoted some 200,000 regular and paramilitary troops to this effort. They also claim that drone-launched U.S. missile attacks and Pakistan's pressing of military offensives against extremist groups in the border areas have meaningfully disrupted Al Qaeda activities there while inflicting heavy losses on their cadre.<sup>35</sup> The August 2009 death of Al Qaeda-allied Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud, assumed to be caused by a U.S.-launched missile, was a notable success, but a flurry of lethal suicide bomb attacks on urban Pakistani targets have demonstrated the resiliency of militant groups. Moreover, some analysts worry that successful drone operations are driving Al Qaeda fighters into Pakistani cities where they will be harder to target, while also exacerbating already significant anti-American sentiments among the Pakistani people. At the same time, the Pakistan Army appears hesitant to expand its ground offensive operation into northern tribal agencies to which Al Qaeda and other militant leaders are believed to have fled, and which may allow Al Qaeda to continue using the rugged region as a base of operations.

## **Implications for U.S. Policy**

In the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, President Bush launched major military operations in South and Southwest Asia as part of the global U.S.-led anti-terrorism effort. Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan has seen substantive success with the vital assistance of neighboring Pakistan. President Obama has bolstered the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan with a central goal of neutralizing the Al Qaeda threat emanating from the region. Yet neighboring Pakistan continues to be an "epicenter of terrorism" from which threats to the United States and other western countries continue to emanate. Recently uncovered evidence suggests that the 9/11 hijackers were themselves based in western Pakistan in early 2001, and a former British Prime Minister has estimated that three-quarters of the most serious terrorism plots investigated in Britain had links to Al Qaeda in Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> As tensions between Pakistan and India remain tense more than one year after the November 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warns that groups under Al Qaeda's Pakistan "syndicate" are actively seeking to destabilize the entire South Asia region, perhaps through a another successful major terrorist attack in India that could provoke all-out war between the region's two largest and nuclear-armed states.<sup>37</sup>

U.S. policy options to address the Al Qaeda threat in Pakistan are limited. Anti-American sentiment is seen to be at peak levels within a broad spectrum of Pakistani society, fueled by perceptions that the United States is fighting a war against Islam, that it is not serious about supporting the process of democratization in Pakistan, and that drone strikes and other suspected covert operations on Pakistani territory are a violation of national sovereignty. A significant and long-term increase in economic and development assistance to Pakistan is a key aspect of the

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<sup>35</sup> "Al Qaeda Weakened as Key Leaders are Slain in Recent Attacks," Associated Press, September 19, 2009; "Setbacks Weaken Al Qaeda's Ability to Mount Attacks, Terrorism Officials Say," Los Angeles Times, October 17, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> "In Military Campaign, Pakistan Finds Hint of 9/11," *New York Times*, October 30, 2009; "Brown Offers Pakistan Anti-Terror Aid," *Washington Post*, December 15, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> "Al Qaeda Could Provoke New India-Pakistan War: Gates," Agence France Presse, January 20, 2010.

Obama Administration's effort to reduce the bilateral "trust deficit"—the Enhanced Partnership With Pakistan Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-73) authorized \$1.5 billion in annual nonmilitary aid through FY2014. Moreover, the United States plans to continue to devote considerable resources toward bolstering Pakistan's counterterrorism and counterinsurgency capabilities. Yet U.S. troops are officially prohibited from operating on Pakistani territory, and the combination of distrust of Americans and a dire security environment make it extremely difficult for U.S. officials to operate effectively there. For the near- and middle-term, then, it appears the U.S. strategy likely will continue to rely on large-scale economic and development aid, redoubled efforts to build Pakistan's relevant military capacity, accelerated drone attacks on militant targets, and admonitions that Pakistani leaders consolidate what progress they have made and endeavor to keep pressure on Al Qaeda and its allies on their territory.

## **Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)<sup>38</sup>**

### **Background and Threat Assessment**

In January 2009, Al Qaeda-inspired militants based in Yemen announced that the Saudi and Yemeni "branches" of Al Qaeda were merging under the banner of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The name "AQAP" formerly denoted militants responsible for the wave of terrorist violence that swept Saudi Arabia from 2003 through 2007. Its original leaders and members were mostly Saudi nationals who were veterans of anti-Soviet fighting in Afghanistan, combatants from subsequent conflicts involving Muslims in other regions, and graduates of terrorist training camps based in Afghanistan. Working with local facilitators, these trained operatives launched a series of suicide bombings, shooting attacks, and kidnappings that targeted foreign civilians and Saudi security forces. The Saudi version of AQAP was largely dismantled and destroyed by Saudi security forces after a long and costly counterterrorism campaign. Saudi security officials believe that many AQAP operatives fled to Yemen to avoid death or capture, helping to lay the groundwork for a reemergence of the organization there in recent years.

In Yemen, Saudis and others joined a growing cadre of local Al Qaeda members and supporters who were taking advantage of the Yemeni government's distraction with internal security challenges. This group called itself "the Al Qaeda Organization in the Southern Arabian Peninsula," although most observers simply referred to the group as "Al Qaeda in Yemen." Its leaders were among those freed in a now infamous jailbreak in 2006, in which 23 convicted terrorists escaped from a supposedly high-security prison in the capital of Sana'a. Its members reportedly were drawn from a new generation of Yemeni militants that was emerging with support from nationals of other countries. Many of these Islamist militants either fought coalition forces in Iraq or were radicalized in the Yemeni prison system.

At first, Al Qaeda in Yemen issued several statements demanding that Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Al Saleh, among other things, release militants from prison, end his cooperation with the United States, renounce democracy and fully implement Islamic law, and permit Yemeni

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<sup>38</sup> Prepared by Jeremy M. Sharp, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, and Christopher M. Blanchard, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs. For more information on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, see CRS Report RL34170, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy M. Sharp, and CRS Report RL33533, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

militants to travel to Iraq to carry out *jihād* against foreign forces. However, unlike their predecessors, this new generation of Al Qaeda-inspired extremists was more inclined to target the Yemeni government itself, in addition to foreign and Western interests in Yemen. Two attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a in 2008 killed 17 people, including one U.S. citizen, and injured dozens of Yemenis. Following the announcement of the Saudi-Yemeni merger in early 2009, AQAP struck targets in Yemen and attempted several attacks inside Saudi Arabia, including the failed suicide bombing attack that injured Saudi Assistant Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdelaziz Al Saud, the director of the kingdom's counterterrorism campaign.

Nearly a year before the failed Christmas Day 2009 airline bombing, U.S. officials had warned that AQAP was growing in strength and capability. In February 2009, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair stated that, "Yemen is reemerging as a jihadist battleground and potential regional base of operations for Al Qaeda to plan internal and external attacks, train terrorists, and facilitate the movement of operatives."<sup>39</sup> In April 2009 testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, National Counterterrorism Center Director Michael Leiter stated:

We have witnessed the reemergence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, with Yemen as a key battleground and potential regional base of operations from which Al Qaeda can plan attacks, train recruits, and facilitate the movement of operatives.... We are concerned that if AQAP strengthens, Al Qaeda leaders could use the group and the growing presence of foreign fighters in the region to supplement its transnational operations capability.

Despite a flurry of senior level attention from Obama Administration officials—in May 2009, Deputy Director of the CIA Stephen Kappes visited Yemen for talks with President Saleh—the consensus among many nongovernment experts for most of 2009 was that AQAP would concentrate its attacks inside Yemen and inside Saudi Arabia. Most observers believed that AQAP's influence and ability to threaten U.S. and Western interests from Yemen remained limited. However, the failed bomb attack against Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on Christmas Day 2009 has once more thrust Yemen into the public spotlight and heightened its relevance for global U.S. counterterrorism operations in a way that other attacks did not, including attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a during 2008.

## **Implications for U.S. Policy**

On January 20, 2010, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffery Feltman stated in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "evidence of the December 25 conspiracy indicates that AQAP has become sufficiently and independently capable of carrying out strikes against the United States and allies outside of the Arabian Peninsula, including in the U.S. homeland."<sup>40</sup> The Obama Administration, which had already increased U.S. military and economic assistance to Yemen before the December 25 failed terrorist attack, has now pledged to boost FY2010 State Department-administered aid to Yemen to \$63 million, up from a total of \$52.5 million specifically appropriated in P.L. 111-117, the FY2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act. Additional FY2010 funds may be allocated in ongoing negotiations between the State Department and congressional appropriators or new funds may be requested in a possible spring-time supplemental aid bill to fund military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, the

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<sup>39</sup> "Al-Qaeda 'Less Capable and Effective': US Intel Chief," *Agence France Presse*, February 12, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Prepared Statement of submitted to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 20, 2010.

Defense Department has indicated it may seek to more than double Section 1206 funding to Yemen in FY2010.<sup>41</sup> In FY2009, DOD allocated \$66.8 million in 1206 funds to provide equipment and training to Yemen's armed forces. By law, the overall allocation of FY2010 Section 1206 funding was capped at \$350 million, and as such, further 1206 funding may also be requested as part of a possible FY2010 supplemental appropriation.

Nevertheless, the Flight 253 incident has once again illustrated a longstanding dilemma for U.S. counterterrorism policy in Yemen. That is, for each successful or attempted Al Qaeda-inspired attack against U.S. interests in Yemen or abroad, the United States looks to the Yemeni government and its security forces for assistance—the same government that harbors, employs, and, to a certain extent, relies on Islamist political figures and some Islamist militants for political support. In January 2010, President Saleh demonstrated a preference to walk a middle line by arguing that, “dialogue is the best way, even with Al-Qaeda, if they set aside their weapons and return to reason.” Meanwhile, Yemeni Islamists have warned that foreign security assistance that extends beyond basic cooperation could invite popular resistance to the Yemeni government and its external partners.<sup>42</sup> In the weeks after the December 25 failed attack, many Administration officials have made it clear that there are no current plans to send major deployments of U.S. troops to Yemen, making the U.S. need for local cooperation evident. Ironically, many Yemeni government critics blame the country's growing instability on the government itself, suggesting that new leadership could resolve some of Yemen's more immediate political crises.

Prospects for the improvement of local security capabilities appear mixed. From 2003 through the present, relatively basic improvements in Saudi counterterrorism techniques and investigative procedures has enabled the government to weather and then reverse a sustained assault from trained, experienced Al Qaeda operatives. However, U.S. government assessments indicate that the capabilities of Yemen's intelligence, security, and law enforcement personnel continue to lag behind those of their northern neighbor. The limited ability or willingness of the Yemeni government to extend a persistent security presence in some areas of the country also creates challenges for denying AQAP operatives freedom of movement, communication, and operation. Saudi officials have identified denial operations as key to their success in dismantling AQAP in the kingdom and in preventing re-infiltration. Although central government authority in Yemen historically has remained relatively weak, many observers in recent years have suggested that President Saleh's ability to secure tribal support that could bolster the government's security presence in outlying provinces where AQAP operatives are active (such as Al Jawf, Ma'rib, Abyan, Shabwa, and Hadramawt) has diminished considerably.

The AQAP threat in the Arabian peninsula also has implications for the Administration's plans to close the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and to, when appropriate, repatriate terrorism suspects detained there to their countries of origin. Approximately 90 of the remaining detainees at Guantanamo Bay are Yemeni nationals. Previous failings in the Yemeni penal system and questions about the effectiveness of Saudi efforts to rehabilitate returning Guantanamo

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<sup>41</sup> For more information on Section 1206 Funding see CRS Report RS22855, *Security Assistance Reform: “Section 1206” Background and Issues for Congress*, by Nina M. Serafino.

<sup>42</sup> Shaykh Abd al Majid al Zindani, a leading conservative Islamist leader inside Yemen, recently commented on U.S.-Yemeni cooperation, saying “We accept any cooperation in the framework of respect and joint interests, and we reject military occupation of our country. And we don't accept the return of colonization.... Yemen's rulers and people must be careful before a (foreign) guardianship is imposed on them.... The day parliament allows the occupation of Yemen, the people will rise up against it and bring it down.” See, “Yemeni Radical Cleric Warns of Foreign Occupation,” *Associated Press*, January 11, 2010.



detainees and other terrorism suspects have raised doubts about the advisability of continuing to remand detainees to Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Although AQAP is led by a Yemeni militant (Nasir al Wuhayshi), one deputy (Sa'id al Shihri) and another former AQAP deputy (Muhammad al Awfi)<sup>43</sup> are Saudi citizens who were repatriated from Guantanamo Bay in November 2007 (detainees #372 and #333 respectively). They, and others, passed through a Saudi government-sponsored terrorism rehabilitation program before returning to militancy in Yemen.<sup>44</sup> On December 28, Congressman Frank Wolf wrote to President Obama requesting that the Administration not release Guantanamo detainees to "unstable" countries.<sup>45</sup> After several other lawmakers called for a halt to all future transfers to Yemen, the Obama Administration agreed to suspend the transfer of detainees from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to Yemen.<sup>46</sup>

## Al Qaeda in Iraq<sup>47</sup>

### Background and Threat Assessment

During 2005-2007, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQ-I) was one of Al Qaeda's most powerful and successful affiliates outside the South Asia region. In late 2006, however, Sunni tribes in Iraq turned against AQ-I and helped the U.S. military reduce AQ-I's activities and influence substantially. This turn later enabled the Bush and Obama Administrations to announce a roadmap for a U.S. military exit from Iraq, to be completed by the end of 2011.

AQ-I has not been eliminated, but its activities have been severely reduced by what a September 2009 Defense Department report calls "significant leadership losses and a diminished presence in most population centers..."<sup>48</sup> According to this report, AQ-I continues to conduct period mass casualty attacks on government buildings in Baghdad and elsewhere, but "at a reduced rate." The report supports analysis by outside experts who assert that AQ-I has evolved into a more indigenous organization that is increasingly run and manned by Iraqi nationals. The organization, therefore, focuses almost exclusively on affecting Iraqi political outcomes, and demonstrates little interest or capability to act outside Iraq or the Middle East region.

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<sup>43</sup> Al Awfi turned himself in to Saudi authorities in February 2009 and gave a lengthy public confession on Saudi television. He described his time at Guantanamo, his rehabilitation and relapse, and his subsequent surrender in a interview with the BBC. Peter Taylor, "Yemen al-Qaeda link to Guantanamo," *BBC Newsnight*, January 13, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> A third Saudi former Guantanamo detainee, Ibrahim al Rubaysh (#192), wrote an article in the eighth edition of AQAP's online magazine. According to one report, six other Saudi former Guantanamo detainees are reported to have joined AQAP. The Saudi newspaper *Ukaz* reported in February 2009 that Turki Asiri, Yusuf al Shihri, Jabir al Fifi, Fahd al Jutayli, Murtada Muqram and Mish'al al Shudukhi had all joined Al Wuhayshi's group in Yemen. According to Saudi security officials, Jutayli was killed in an explosion in Saudi Arabia in September 2009. See, *Arab News* (Jeddah), "Blast Kills 3 Terrorists," January 19, 2010; and, *Caversham BBC Monitoring*, "Web: Rising Profile of Al-Qa'idah in Yemen," April 27, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> "Rep. Wolf Urges Halt in Release of Detainees to Yemen," *Congressional Quarterly Today*, December 29, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> "Obama Halts Yemen Transfers but Vows Guantanamo Closure," *Agence France Presse*, January 5, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Prepared by Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs.

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq" Report to Congress, September 2009.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

Nevertheless, the influence of AQ-I in Iraq could grow in 2010 if Iraq's Sunni Arabs—who have been the core of the insurgency against the U.S. presence in Iraq and against the Shiite Muslim dominated government—feel disenfranchised or alienated from the ongoing political process. Fears of such disillusionment grew in January 2010 when allies of Iraq's Shiite political leaders disqualified 500 candidates, most of them Sunni Arabs, from running in the scheduled March 7, 2010, parliamentary elections. They were disqualified on the grounds that these candidates are supporting the outlawed Baath Party of former President Saddam Hussein. The reactions of the disqualified candidates and the constituencies they represent could affect the success of the elections and overall security environment, which in turn could have implications for the pace or scope of U.S. withdrawal plans

## North Africa/Sahel: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)<sup>49</sup>

### Background and Threat Assessment

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, also known as Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb or AQLIM) and its offshoots or autonomous cells pose the main terrorist threat in North Africa and the Sahel. Under pressure from Algerian security forces, AQIM has increasingly moved its operations out of the capital of Algiers. The vast area of Algeria's six Saharan provinces and of its sparsely populated Sahelian neighbors affords AQIM optimal terrain in which to move and conduct training as well as to advance its regional ambitions. Algeria's North African neighbors, Tunisia and Morocco, have prevented AQIM from penetrating their territories, except for some recruitment of individuals; both governments fear that AQIM will transfer operational capabilities to indigenous groups. Neither has experienced a major terrorism attack for several years, but both governments and that of Mauritania continue to unearth alleged Al Qaeda cells and affiliated terrorists.

It is not clear what AQIM's "unity" with or "allegiance" to Al Qaeda means in practice as the group does not appear to take directions from leaders in Afghanistan/Pakistan. A nominal link is probably mutually beneficial, burnishing Al Qaeda's international credentials as it enhances AQIM's legitimacy among radicals to facilitate recruitment. Since "uniting" with Al Qaeda in 2006, AQIM's rhetoric against the West and governments in the region and beyond, e.g., to Nigeria, as well as its calls for *jihād* against the United States, France, and Spain have increased. Yet, its operations remain geographically limited to Algeria and the Sahel, and public information available does not suggest a direct AQIM threat to the U.S. homeland.

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<sup>49</sup> Prepared by Carol Migdalovitz, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, Nicolas Cook, Specialist in African Affairs, and Lauren Ploch, Analyst in African Affairs. See CRS Report RS21532, *Algeria: Current Issues*; CRS Report RS21579, *Morocco: Current Issues*; and CRS Report RS21666, *Tunisia: Current Issues*, all by Carol Migdalovitz, for additional background and information.

## Algeria

AQIM's origins date to the 1990s, when Islamist extremists and security forces engaged in a conflict sparked by a 1992 military coup that prevented an Islamist political party from winning a national election in Algeria. The terrorists sought (and seek) to replace the Algerian regime with an Islamic state. The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) was then the main terrorist threat.<sup>50</sup> In 1998, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) split from GIA, claiming to oppose the GIA's indiscriminate targeting of civilians. In 2003, under new leader Abdelmalik Droukdel (aka Abu Musab Abdulwadood), GSPC declared "allegiance" to Al Qaeda. In 2006, it announced "unity" with Al Qaeda, changing its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. AQIM raises funds primarily by kidnapping for ransoms and by trafficking in arms, drugs, vehicles, cigarettes, and persons.<sup>51</sup> It also gets small-scale funding from cells in Europe.<sup>52</sup> AQIM communicates via sophisticated videos on the Internet.

In 2006, AQIM increased its attacks against the government, security forces, and foreign workers in Algeria. In 2007, it shifted tactics to "Iraqi-style," suicide attacks, with simultaneous bombings of the Government Palace (the prime and interior ministries) and a suburban police station in April, and of the Constitutional Council and the U.N. headquarters in December, among other attacks. An AQIM suicide bomber failed to assassinate President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in September. After a relative lull, terrorist attacks on security forces escalated in summer 2008, when suicide bombers perpetrated a particularly bloody attack at a police academy, resulting in more than 40 deaths. In 2009, perhaps because security forces had made it difficult to conduct operations in the capital, AQIM mounted attacks elsewhere. AQIM continued to focus on the Berber region of the Kabylie in northeastern Algeria, where the security presence had been reduced to pacify civil unrest.<sup>53</sup> In June, gunmen killed 24 gendarmes (paramilitary police) in an ambush more than 200 miles east Algiers. In July, they ambushed a military convoy 90 miles west of Algiers, killing at least 14 soldiers.<sup>54</sup>

Several Al Qaeda-linked international terrorist plots have involved Algerians. In December 1999, Ahmed Ressay, an Algerian trained in Afghanistan, was arrested after attempting to enter the United States from Canada; he was convicted for the so-called Millennium Plot that planned bombings in Los Angeles. His associates and other Algerians in Canada were linked to the GIA and Al Qaeda. In January 2003, six Algerians were arrested in a London apartment with traces of ricin, a deadly poison with no known antidote. In October 2009, two French brothers of Algerian origin, one a worker at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, were arrested in France after intelligence agencies came to suspect them of "criminal activities related

<sup>50</sup> GIA remains on the U.S. State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO's), although its heyday ended in 2001 and it has not perpetrated an attack since 2006.

<sup>51</sup> See also, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, "Three Al Qaeda Associates Arrested on Drug and Terrorism Charges," Press Release, December 18, 2009.

<sup>52</sup> See also, Michael Jonson and Christian Nils Larson, "Illegal Tender: Funding Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Janes Intelligence Review*, October 2008.

<sup>53</sup> See also, U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism*, 2008, released April 30, 2009, available online at <http://www.state.gov>.

<sup>54</sup> Some attributed the second ambush to the Protectors of Salafi Call, which reportedly had split from the GSPC and, therefore, is not considered AQIM.<sup>54</sup> Others attributed the attack to a regional command of AQIM and still others suggested that AQIM is encroaching on the Protectors' territory. BBC Monitoring Middle East, "Five Regions Reportedly Designated for 'Terrorist Deployment' in Algeria," *El Khabar* website, August 5, 2009; and, BBC Monitoring Newsfile, "Retreating of the Salafi Call Protectors," *Echourouk el Youmi* website, August 17, 2009.

to a terror group,” i.e., AQIM.<sup>55</sup> Algeria continues to be a major source of international terrorists, and Algerians have been arrested on suspicion of belonging to or supporting AQIM in France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Britain.

## **The Sahel**

AQIM has become increasingly active in the West African Sahel, where it “continues to demonstrate its intent and ability to conduct attacks against U.S. citizens or other foreign nationals,” according to the U.S. State Department.<sup>56</sup> The Sahel stretches from Mauritania to Chad and encompasses several poor, often politically unstable countries with large, sparsely populated northern border areas and limited state capacity to monitor or secure them. AQIM reportedly maintains mobile training camps along the Algeria-Mali border, and carries out smuggling operations in countries across the Sahel, taking advantage of porous international borders. The group has carried out raids on military and police targets, primarily in Mauritania and Mali; kidnapped and assassinated soldiers and tourists in these countries and Niger; attacked foreign embassies in Mauritania; and repeatedly clashed with the militaries of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Algeria.

The threat of kidnapping is of growing concern. In 2007, AQIM associates murdered four French tourists, prompting cancelation of the famous Dakar Motor Rally. In 2008, AQIM assassinated 12 Mauritanian soldiers and kidnapped the U.N. envoy to Niger and a Canadian colleague. The Canadians and several European tourists kidnapped in early 2009 were held in Mali and ransomed several months later. A Briton in the group was beheaded after his government refused to meet AQIM demands to release a radical cleric who is an alleged Al Qaeda member. In June 2009, a U.S. aid worker in Mauritania was shot in an apparent kidnapping attempt for which AQIM claimed credit, and, in August, AQIM perpetrated a suicide bombing near the French embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania. It also assassinated a Malian military official involved in the arrest of several AQIM members. That killing was followed by a series of armed clashes between AQIM and Malian forces, which, with Algerian military aid and French air intelligence support, vowed an “all-out war” on AQIM. In November 2009, a heavily armed group attempted unsuccessfully to kidnap U.S. embassy employees in central Niger.

AQIM’s presence in the Sahel is divided between two main groups whose members are predominantly Algerian, but include individuals from Mauritania, Niger, Mali as well as Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and Benin.<sup>57</sup> The groups appear to cooperate operationally, but their roles and relations are not clear. Differences between them may be reflected in the outcomes of the 2008/2009 kidnappings noted above: in one a British hostage was executed, reportedly for jihadist reasons, while the other hostages were ransomed.<sup>58</sup> The group that sought ransoms has

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<sup>55</sup> Emily Andrews, “Big Bang Scientist Admits Plotting Al Qaeda Atrocity,” *Daily Mail*, October 12, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Travel Warning: Mauritania,” December 2, 2009.

<sup>57</sup> One group, reportedly led by Yahia Djouadi and key associates, and is linked closely to AQIM’s Algerian leadership. A second group operates semi-autonomously under the leadership of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a Mali-based former GIA and GSPC member who reportedly split from the GSPC after opposing Droukdel’s accession to the GSPC leadership. See the U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Targets Al Qaida-Affiliated Terror Group in Algeria,” July 17, 2008; Geoffrey York, “The Shadowy Negotiator Who Freed Fowler and Guay,” *Globe and Mail*, October 17, 2009; and, *Reuters*, “Mali Arrests Four Al Qaeda Members Near Algeria,” May 1, 2009, *inter alia*.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Black, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar: The Algerian Jihad’s Southern Amir,” *Terrorism Monitor*, (7:12), May, 2009; and U.N. Security Council (UNSC), Committee pursuant to resolution 1267 (1999), various documents, *inter alia*.

been responsible for many terrorist attacks, but it reportedly primarily pursues criminal income-earning operations and maintains a regional network of contacts who include state officials, possibly marking it as relatively pragmatic compared to other AQIM elements.

## **Implications for U.S. Policy**

U.S. policy makers' efforts to assist North African and Sahelian governments in countering AQIM threats may need to take into account colonial history and regional power balances and navigate them adroitly. Algeria, Mauritania, Niger, and Mali are all former colonies of France and suspicious of foreign involvement in their internal affairs and territories. Yet, despite their unease, governments in the region are attempting to improve their counterterrorism capabilities with some foreign assistance in order to address the escalating threat of regional terrorism. Algeria, which waged a bloody war against France for independence, is particularly opposed to foreign interference. It has a stronger military and is richer than its neighbors thanks to its oil and gas wealth and sees itself as the regional power. This may breed some resentment in the neighborhood and discourage cooperation, as may Algeria's attempts to act as the pre-eminent regional interlocutor for the United States. Nonetheless, Algeria has hosted regional counterterrorism meetings, provided air cover for some counterterrorist operations in the Sahel, and provided military assistance to Mali.

The U.S. government conducts several initiatives aimed at countering violent extremism in the region. In 2002, the Department of State launched the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) to increase border security, and military and counterterrorism capacities of Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania. PSI programs focused solely on building security sector capacity. In 2005, the Bush Administration announced a "follow-on" program known as the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). An inter-agency, multi-faceted effort, TSCTP integrates counterterrorism and military training with development assistance and public diplomacy. It aims to "improve individual country and regional capabilities ..., disrupt efforts to recruit and train new terrorist fighters, particularly from the young and rural poor, and counter efforts to establish safe havens for domestic and outside extremist groups."<sup>59</sup> TSCTP is led by the State Department, but other agencies, including the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Department of Defense (DOD), implement components of the program, including DOD's Operation Enduring Freedom – Trans-Sahara (OEF-TS).<sup>60</sup> Under OEF-TS, U.S. military forces work with African counterparts to improve intelligence, command and control, logistics, and border control, and to execute joint operations against terrorist groups.<sup>61</sup>

As democracy struggles to take hold in the region, Sahelian countries face diverse security threats, including armed insurrection, banditry, illegal trafficking, and other criminal activities that may threaten state stability more directly than Islamist terrorism. Some in the development

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<sup>59</sup> U.S. State Department, FY2010 Congressional Budget Justification. TSCTP includes Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. Libya has been invited to join. Countries nominated for TSCTP membership by a USG agency are consulted and must agree on the designation.

<sup>60</sup> For more information, see CRS Report RL34003, *Africa Command: U.S. Strategic Interests and the Role of the U.S. Military in Africa*, by Lauren Ploch.

<sup>61</sup> TSCTP and OEF-TS capacity building activities with Chad, Mauritania, and Niger were limited in FY2009 due to U.S. government restrictions. Sanctions on Mauritania, applied after the August 2008 coup, were lifted in September 2009. Programming in Chad and Niger has been restricted due to both political concerns and human rights vetting issues.

community question whether U.S. policy toward the region strikes an appropriate balance between countering extremism and addressing basic challenges of governance, security, and human development, which some view as contributing to the rise of extremism. Others question whether the U.S. response employs the appropriate mix of civilian and military resources or suggests a possibly counterproductive “militarization” of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

## **East Africa<sup>62</sup>**

### **Background and Threat Assessment**

The East Africa region has emerged over the past two decades as a region that is highly vulnerable to terrorist attacks and is considered a safe haven for international terrorist groups. Africa’s porous borders and lax security at airports and seaports and weak law enforcement agencies are major concerns. Political, ethnic, and religious conflicts in the region create an environment conducive to terrorist groups. The inability of African security services to detect and intercept terrorist activities due to lack of technology and sufficient trained and motivated manpower is a major impediment in dealing with the terrorist threats in Africa. The takeover of power in Sudan by the National Islamic Front (NIF) in 1989 led to a significant increase in the activities of international terror groups in Africa. The NIF government provided safe haven for well known international terrorist organizations and individuals, and the government’s security services also were directly engaged in facilitating and assisting domestic and international terror groups. Sudan has also been a safe haven for major terrorist figures, including the founder and leader of Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden. Bin Laden used Sudan as a base of operations until he returned to Afghanistan in mid-1996, where he had previously been a major financier of Arab volunteers in the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Many observers contend that it was during his five year stay in Sudan that Bin Laden laid down the foundation for Al Qaeda. The penetration by Al Qaeda into East Africa is directly tied to NIF’s early years of support to international terrorist organizations. The East Africa region is by far the most impacted by international terrorist activities in Africa. The 1990s saw a dramatic and daring terrorist attacks against American interests in Africa. The U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 by Al Qaeda killed 229 people, 12 of whom were American citizens, and injured over 5,000 people. In November, 2002, simultaneous terrorist attacks struck Mombasa, Kenya. Al Qaeda suicide bombers drove a four-wheel drive vehicle packed with explosives into the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Mombasa, killing 10 Kenyans and three Israelis. In June 1995, members of Gama’a Islamiya, an Egyptian extremist group, tried to assassinate President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

### **Somalia: Safe Haven for Terrorist Groups?**

The United States, Somalia’s neighbors, and some Somali groups have expressed concern over the years about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Somalia. In the mid-1990s, Islamic courts began to emerge in parts of the country, especially in the capital of Mogadishu. These courts functioned as local governments and often enforced decisions by using their own militia.

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<sup>62</sup> Prepared by Ted Dagne, Specialist in African Affairs.

Members of the Al Ittihad Al Islami<sup>63</sup> militia reportedly provided the bulk of the security forces for these courts in the 1990s. The absence of central authority in Somalia created an environment conducive to the proliferation of armed factions throughout the country. Somali factions, including the so-called Islamic groups, often go through realignments or simply disappear from the scene. Very little is known about the leadership or organizational structure of these groups.

There have been three known radical Islamic groups in Somalia whose prominence alternately waxed and waned: Al Ittihad Al Islami (Islamic Union), Al Islah (Reform), and Al Tabligh (Conveyers of God's Work). In 1995, a group called Jihad Al Islam, led by Sheikh Abbas bin Omar, emerged in Mogadishu, and gave the two main warlords, General Mohammed Farah Aideed and Ali Mahdi, an ultimatum to end their factional fighting. The group claimed at that time that it maintained offices in several countries, including Yemen, Pakistan, Kenya, and Sudan. Not much was heard subsequently from Jihad Al Islam, although a group of Somalis later formed the Sharia (Islamic law) Implementation Club (SIC) in 1996. In late September 2001, the Bush Administration added Al Ittihad to a list of terrorism-related entities whose assets were frozen by an Executive Order. Bush Administration officials accused Al Ittihad Al Islami of links with Al Qaeda. None of the groups mentioned above remain active, although some of their leaders are now leaders of groups engaged in terrorist activities in Somalia. The leader of Hizb Al Islam, Sheikh Hassan Aweys, who is on the U.S. terrorist list, was a leader in Al Ittihad Al Islami.

### **The Islamic Courts Union, Al Shabaab**

Some observers have argued that the takeover of power in Mogadishu by the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) may have ended the insecurity and use of the country as safe haven for international terrorists in Somalia if Ethiopian forces, with the support of the United States, had not intervened to oust the ICU. The ouster of the ICU, in the view of these observers, created a security vacuum in south-central Somalia and enabled Al Qaeda-affiliated Somali commanders to take control of many of the ICU fighters. Many ICU fighters, who joined the resistance against the Ethiopian forces, soon became members of Al Shabaab (the youth), a fairly new group led by a small group of Somalis with ties to foreign terrorist groups. Many foreign fighters and Somali expatriates, including over a dozen Somali-Americans, who went to Somalia to join the fight against the Ethiopian forces at the beginning of the intervention later fought against the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda, however, have not been able to win the hearts and minds of the majority of Somalis.

The TFG and a number of formerly anti-government armed Islamic groups have formed alliances to fight Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda. A faction of Hizb al Islam has joined the TFG and Al Shabaab has not been able to forge a formal alliance with Hizb Al Islam and its leader Sheikh Aweys. Another Islamic militia group, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaah, has become an ally of the TFG and is currently fighting against Al Shabaab. On February 1, 2010, Al Shabaab and the Ras Kamboni group, led by Hassan Al Turki, reportedly agreed to merge under one name: Al Shabaab Mujahidin Movement. Both Al Shabaab and the Ras Kamboni group have been coordinating their attacks against the TFG and working closely with foreign fighters over the past two years. Senior

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<sup>63</sup> The 2005 U.S. State Department Country Report on Terrorism described Al Ittihad Al Islami as "a Somali extremist group that was formed in the 1980s and reached its peak in the early 1990s, failed to obtain its objective of establishing a Salafist emirate in Somalia and steadily declined following the downfall of the Siad Barre regime in 1991 and Somalia's subsequent collapse into anarchy. AIAI was not internally cohesive, lacked central leadership, and suffered divisions between factions."

TFG officials consider the merger a reaffirmation of a pre-existing informal alliance between the two groups.<sup>64</sup>

U.S. targeted attacks against the leadership of Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab have weakened the two organizations over the past two years. Two of the three wanted Al Qaeda terrorists in Somalia, Abu Taha al Sudani (a Sudanese national married to a Somali) and Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan were reportedly killed in 2007 and 2009, respectively. A number of Al Shabaab senior commanders have also been killed in the past two years. The killing of Nabhan in a U.S. strike reportedly shook the leadership of Al Shabaab and is likely to weaken the link between Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda, and it may take some time for Al Qaeda to replace Nabhan with someone familiar with that region. Of the three most wanted Al Qaeda leaders in East Africa, the only one left is the leader of the group and the mastermind of the U.S. embassy bombings: Harun Fazul (a Comorian national).

### **The Leadership of Al Shabaab**

The leaders of Al Shabaab are not well known, with few exceptions. Ahmed Abdi Godane (also known as Abu Zubayr), who is on the U.S. terrorism list and who trained and fought in Afghanistan, is a key commander from the semi-autonomous region of Somaliland. In September 2009, Al Shabaab released a video, entitled “At your service Osama,” declaring its allegiance to Bin Laden. Godane appeared on the video tape offering his service to Bin Laden. Mukhtar Robow, who is on the U.S. terrorism list and is a native of southern Somalia, is considered one of the key leaders of Al Shabaab and a former spokesman, although in late 2009 he reportedly was marginalized. Another key leader is Ibrahim Haji Jama (Al Afghani), who is on the U.S. terrorism list and also from Somaliland, and reportedly trained and fought in Afghanistan. Hassan Al Turki is a member of the Ogaden clan from Ethiopia, who has openly called for *Jihad*, and works closely with foreign fighters. In 2004, he was placed on the U.S. terrorism list. Another individual who was often referred to as the commander of Al Shabaab forces was Aden Ayro. Ayro’s importance and influence was highly exaggerated since he did not have a leadership position in the organization. Ayro was suspected of killing four aid workers in the breakaway region of Somaliland as well as a Somali scholar in Mogadishu named Abdulqadir Yahya. In May 2008, Ayro was killed in a U.S. air strike. Since the killing of Ayro, the insurgency has intensified its attacks and membership in the organization increased. One of the major mistakes that contributed to the emergence and strength of Al Shabaab was the labeling of the leadership of the Courts as extremist and jihadist, and the failure to identify and target the leadership of Al Shabaab, according to some observers. In March 2008, the State Department designated Al Shabaab as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity.

### **Implications for U.S. Policy**

Al Qaeda poses a direct threat against U.S. interests and allies in East Africa. Al Shabaab, on the other hand, appears more focused on carrying out attacks against Somali citizens, the TFG, and African Union peacekeeping forces (AMISOM). On February 2, 2010, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair at a Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearing stated:

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<sup>64</sup> Ted Dagne interviewed President Sheik Sharif Ahmad of Somalia and other senior officials, January 29 and February 1, 2010.



“We judge most Al Shabaab and East Africa-based Al Qaeda members will remain focused on regional objectives in the near-term. Nevertheless, East Africa-based Al Qaeda leaders or Al Shabaab may elect to redirect to the Homeland some of the Westerners, including North Americans, now training and fighting in Somalia.”<sup>65</sup>

Reportedly, over a dozen Somali youth from Minneapolis and other parts of the United States have left the U.S. and some community leaders believe they went to Somalia to join the insurgency. There is no clear evidence of how many and for what purpose these Somalis left Minneapolis, although some U.S. counterterrorism officials have expressed concern to Congress that some of these individuals could be recruited by Al Qaeda to perform attacks in Somalia or the United States.<sup>66</sup> U.S. officials stressed in early 2009 that they did not possess “credible reporting” that suggested such an operation targeting the U.S. homeland was planned or imminent.<sup>67</sup> The concerns appear based in part on the fact that one of the suicide bombers in the October 2008 attacks in Puntland and Somaliland was an American-Somali from Minneapolis, although broader concerns exist about the participation of U.S. citizens in Al Shabaab activities and potential U.S.-based financing for terrorist groups in Somalia. The December 2009 Mogadishu suicide attack in which three TFG ministers and over a dozen civilians were killed was carried out by a Somali from Denmark. Over the past decade, many Somalis have returned to Somalia to work as journalists, humanitarian workers, and teachers. A number of these Somalis have been killed in the past two years by insurgents and security forces.

The Obama Administration has been engaged in support of the new leadership of the TFG, the same leaders that the Ethiopian government with the support of the United States ousted from power in late 2006. One option available to the Administration is engagement with the Islamic insurgents and clan elders to deal with the political and security problems facing Somalia. According to some observers, it is pivotal to strengthen the moderate elements of the Islamic movements discretely. Most observers believe that Al Shabaab can only be contained by another Islamic movement supported by clan elders. Some of the most influential leaders in Al Shabaab are on the U.N. and U.S. Terrorism Lists. Some observers argue that removing some of these individuals from the Terrorism List in exchange for some concessions, including an end to the insurgency and acceptance of a negotiated settlement, should be considered as an option. One of the key facilitators of the Djibouti talks that formed the TFG was a Somali man on a U.N. Terrorism List. According to U.N. officials, he was subsequently removed from the list.

The top leaders of Al Shabaab are determined to continue their terrorist campaign and are not inclined to participate in negotiations. Targeted measures, including sanctions and assassination of the most extreme elements of Al Shabaab, could pave the way for other moderate leaders to emerge. However, others believe that this option is likely to backfire in the short term and increase anti-Western violence. Another option is to refer some of these individuals to the

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<sup>65</sup> Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair, Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 2, 2010.

<sup>66</sup> See “Young Somali Men Missing from Minneapolis,” *International Herald Tribune*, November 27, 2008. In March 2009, an NCTC official expressed “concern... over the travel by some tens of Somali-American young men back to Somalia, some of whom have trained and fought with Al Shabaab.” Testimony of Andrew Liepman, Deputy Director, Intelligence, National Counterterrorism Center before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, March 11, 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Testimony of Andrew Liepman, op cit. “Let me stress we don’t have a body of reporting that indicates U.S. persons who have traveled to Somalia are planning to execute attacks in the United States. We don’t have that credible reporting. But we do worry that there is the potential that these individuals could be indoctrinated by al Qaeda while they’re in Somalia and then returned to the United States with the intention to conduct attacks.”

International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes. The most effective way of containing the extremists, most observers contend, is to look for a Somali-led solution, both political and military. The TFG, Somaliland, Puntland, and other moderate Somali forces could form a coalition to contain the advances of the most extreme elements of Al Shabaab politically and militarily. Such a coalition is likely to get the support of the Somali population rather than an external force. The coalition can be assisted by neighboring countries. Many Somali observers contend that a Somali-led initiative would take away one of the most powerful justifications used by Al Shabaab to wage war, the presence of foreign forces.

## **Al Qaeda and Radical Islamist Groups in Southeast Asia<sup>68</sup>**

In the 1990s, Al Qaeda made significant inroads into the Southeast Asian region, particularly the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore. Al Qaeda not only set up regional offices, but it also helped create, strengthen, and make more violent indigenous groups such as the Indonesian based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network. By the mid-2000s, however, the actions of various national authorities in Southeast Asia appears to have drastically reduced the size and influence of Al Qaeda, JI, and other sympathetic groups. Throughout the decade, the United States—along with Australia—used capacity-building assistance and at times diplomatic pressure to support and push regional governments' counterterrorism efforts. It should be noted that while there has been much anti-Western terrorist activity in Southeast Asia many militants in the region are focused on local agendas.

Key factors in weakening violent Islamist groups in Southeast Asia have been: the generally moderate nature of Islam in Southeast Asia; a relatively high level of economic development; the existence of democratic political systems in many affected countries; the miscalculation of JI's radical wing in killing Muslim civilians in their bomb attacks; and the ability of most national governments to marshal the resources and public support to root out the most violent groups. One possible exception to these observations is the southern Philippines, where radical Islamist groups have been abetted by a combination of ongoing sectarian/civil conflict and relatively weak government capacity. Since 2002, the U.S. has sent ongoing deployments of hundreds of troops to the southern Philippines to advise and assist the Philippine military.

### **Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiya**

After the September 11, 2001, attacks, U.S. attention in Southeast Asia focused on radical Islamist groups in Southeast Asia, particularly the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist network, that have had or been alleged to have had ties to the Al Qaeda network. In the years before and immediately following 2001, Al Qaeda used its Southeast Asia cells to help organize and finance its global activities—including the September 11 attacks—and to provide safe harbor to Al Qaeda operatives, such as the convicted organizer of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, Ramzi Yousef.

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<sup>68</sup> Prepared by Mark Manyin, Specialist in Asian Affairs, ext. 7-7653 and Bruce Vaughn, Specialist in Asian Affairs, ext. 7-3144. For more, see CRS Report RL34194, *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*, coordinated by Bruce Vaughn.

By the end of the 1990s, JI and Al Qaeda appear to have developed a highly symbiotic relationship. There reportedly was some overlap in membership. They shared training camps in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Mindanao, and Al Qaeda provided JI with considerable financial support.<sup>69</sup> They shared personnel, such as when JI sent an operative with scientific expertise to Afghanistan to try to develop an anthrax program for Al Qaeda.<sup>70</sup> The two networks jointly planned operations and reportedly conducted attacks in Southeast Asia together.<sup>71</sup>

Members of JI with extensive ties to Al Qaeda, are known to have helped two of the September 11, 2001, hijackers. In 1999 and 2000, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok were the sites for important strategy meetings among some of the September 11 plotters. By 2002 roughly one-fifth of Al Qaeda's organizational strength was centered in Southeast Asia. Al Qaeda and JI leaders met in Southeast Asia for at least two critical meetings: One in January 2000 in Kuala Lumpur, during which plans for the attack on the USS Cole and the September 11 hijackings were discussed. The other occurred in Bangkok in January 2002, during which an Al Qaeda representative reportedly sat in on the planning of the Bali bombings. Two of the September 11 hijackers and Zacarias Moussaoui, who pled guilty in April 2005 to U.S. charges of involvement in the September 11 plot, apparently visited Malaysia and met with cell members in 2000. Additionally, the FBI claims that Malaysian cell members provided Moussaoui with \$35,000 and a business reference.

In 1999 and 2000, several Al Qaeda operatives involved in the September 11 and the *USS Cole* attacks used Kuala Lumpur as a meeting and staging ground. According to the confessions of one captured Al Qaeda leader, Malaysia was viewed as an ideal location for transiting and meeting because it allowed visa-free entry to citizens of most Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia.

In 1999 and 2000, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok were the sites for important strategy meetings among some of the September 11 plotters. By 2002, according to one prominent expert on Al Qaeda, roughly one-fifth of Al Qaeda's organizational strength was centered in Southeast Asia.

Years of surveillance, arrests, and killings of JI members by various states are believed to have significantly degraded the more militant JI factions, which were most closely associated with Al Qaeda. As a result, by the middle of the 2000s, JI's known links to Al Qaeda reportedly dwindled to almost nothing.<sup>72</sup> JI appears to be taking direction from more "bureaucratic" elements that oppose the militants' anti-western tactics as undermining their preferred, longer-term strategy of building up military capacity and using religious proselytization to create a mass base sufficient to support an Islamic revolution in the future. Moreover, the crackdown on JI appears to have seriously weakened the organization, degrading its command, communication, and fundraising structures to the point where many analysts believe it primarily operates only in Indonesia, with a number of operatives also active on the large southern Philippine island of Mindanao and on the Sulu islands extending from Mindanao. Both areas have majority Muslim populations.

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<sup>69</sup> Sidney Jones, "Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged but Still Dangerous," *International Crisis Group Report #63*, August 26, 2003, p. 1; Abuza, "Funding Terrorism in Southeast Asia," p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 151. Yazid Sufaat is the individual JI sent to Kandahar.

<sup>71</sup> Al Qaeda and JI leaders met in Southeast Asia for at least two critical meetings: One in January 2000 in Kuala Lumpur, during which plans for the attack on the *USS Cole* and the September 11 hijackings were discussed. The other occurred in Bangkok in January 2002, during which an Al Qaeda representative reportedly sat in on the planning of the Bali bombings.

<sup>72</sup> Eric Schmitt, "Southeast Asia Sees Gains against Insurgencies," *International Herald Tribune*, June 9, 2008.

In September 2009, Indonesian authorities killed the leader of one such cell, Noordin Mohammed Top. Top, whose faction changed its name to the Al-Qaeda Jihad Organisation for the Malay Archipelago, is believed to have been responsible for organizing the near-simultaneous July 17, 2009 bombings of the J.W. Marriot and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta. The bombings were the first successful anti-Western terrorist attack in Indonesia in four years. Their sophistication triggered speculation that Al Qaeda had renewed ties with Top, suspicions that received more credence when a laptop computer was found at Top's hideout that reportedly established linkages between Indonesian militants and Al Qaeda.<sup>73</sup>

### **Suspected Al Qaeda Links to JI Splinter Cells**

The laptop also reportedly contained information stating that militant Syaifudin Zuhri bin Ahmad Jaelani, who is thought to have recruited the suicide bombers for the July 17 hotel bombings, was recruited by Al Qaeda while studying in Yemen.<sup>74</sup> Syaifudin is thought to have become radicalized while in Yemen between 1995 and 2000.<sup>75</sup> Syaifudin, who was a veteran of conflict in Poso with links to international terrorist financing networks, was thought likely to replace Top. He was killed in a shoot out with Indonesian authorities in October 2009.<sup>76</sup>

Southeast Asian terrorism expert Sydney Jones has described the central question of the Jakarta hotel bombings as whether Top was imitating or had developed some "structural affiliation" with Al Qaeda.<sup>77</sup> The *Economist* has stated that "Evidence recovered from the scene of Mr. Top's death has also shown that he had links with al-Qaida and received financial support from the Middle East."<sup>78</sup>

The head of Indonesia's anti-terror Detachment 88 Brigadier-General Saut Usman Nasution warned in November 2009 that although Top and other violent militants had been killed or captured, new cells or splinter groups could be a source of strife, particularly in Indonesian regions such as Sulawesi and Maluku where there has been a history of inter-communal violence between Christians and Muslims. Nasution stated that these groups are in the process of recruiting new members to their organizations and expressed his concern that some of the 148 terrorists in detention in Indonesia may rejoin terrorist organizations or form new ones upon their release from prison. He and others in Indonesia have called for a deradicalisation programme to prevent these releases from becoming a source of strife in the country.<sup>79</sup> From 2002 to 2009 some 454 militants were reportedly arrested in Indonesia. Of those 352 were sent to jail.<sup>80</sup>

In January 2010, it was reported by Pakistani authorities that a Filipino militant was killed in a U.S. missile strike against a militant compound near the border of North and South Waziristan, Pakistan. The apparent death of Abdul Basit Usman, a bomb making expert reportedly with links

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<sup>73</sup> Peter Gelling and Mark McDonald, "Indonesian Police Kill Alleged Terror Mastermind," *The New York Times*, September 18, 2009.

<sup>74</sup> "Letter Found on Top's laptop Implicates Jibril, States Jaelani Recruited by Al Qaeda in Yemen," *OSC*, September 29, 2009.

<sup>75</sup> "Indonesian Terror Recruiter Syaifudin Likely Successor to Noordin," *OSC*, September 25, 2009.

<sup>76</sup> Sulastri Osman, "The Fatal Allure of Extremist Logic," *RSIS Commentaries*, Singapore, October 23, 2009.

<sup>77</sup> Sydney Jones, "Noordin's Dangerous Liaisons," *Tempo*, August 9, 2009.

<sup>78</sup> "Indonesia Risk: Security Risk," *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, October 26, 2009.

<sup>79</sup> Salim Osman, "New Terror Cells Taking Over JI's Role," *The Straits Times*, November 20, 2009.

<sup>80</sup> "New Terror Cells Planning Attacks," *New Straits Times*, November 20, 2009.

to Abu Sayyaf and JI, points to ties between al-Qaida in Pakistan and militants in Southeast Asia.<sup>81</sup>

It was reported on January 17, 2010, that the U.S. government was considering placing Hambali, an Indonesian militant believed to be responsible for the 2002 Bali bombing, on trial in Washington, DC. Hambali was captured in Thailand in 2003 and was held in Guantanamo since 2006 for his suspected involvement in the 2002 Bali bombings that killed over 200 people.<sup>82</sup> On January 20 it was reported that the U.S. had rejected a request from the Government of Indonesia to turn Hambali over to Indonesian authorities for trial in Indonesia.<sup>83</sup>

## **The Abu Sayyaf Group**

Another Southeast Asian group that reportedly has had sporadic ties with Al Qaeda is Abu Sayyaf, which is a small, violent, faction-ridden Muslim group that operates in the western fringes of the big southern Filipino island of Mindanao and on the Sulu islands extending from Mindanao. Abu Sayyaf had links with Osamu bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization in the early 1990s, but these links reportedly dwindled throughout by the early 2000s. Abu Sayyaf has a record of killings and kidnappings. Under pressure from U.S.-supported Philippine military operations since 2002, Abu Sayyaf's armed strength declined from an estimated 1,000 to about 200-300 by the middle to end of the decade. Since 2003, Abu Sayyaf has carried out bombings and plotted bombings in cooperation with JI and another, much larger Muslim group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), including bombings in Manila.

Since 2002, the United States has deployed troops to the southern Philippines to advise the Philippine military, the Philippine Armed Forces (AFP), in their fight against the Abu Sayyaf Group. The U.S. role in the operations is supposed to be non-combat and has involved the provision of intelligence and communications support of the AFP, including the employment of U.S. P-3 surveillance aircraft; deployment of Navy Seal and Special Operations personnel with AFP ground units; joint training exercises with the AFP, assistance to the AFP in planning operations; and conducting civic action projects with the AFP to improve the lives of the local populace.<sup>84</sup> The civic action projects (medical treatment, water purification installations, farm markets, renovation of schools) on the islands of Basilan and Jolo appear to have weakened support for Abu Sayyaf in these locations.<sup>85</sup>

## **Implications for U.S. Policy**

Thus far in Southeast Asia, actions taken by regional governments appear to have nearly neutralized, though not eliminated, the threat from Islamist terror groups focused on Western

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<sup>81</sup> Ishtiaq Mahshud, "Filipino Militant Killed by US Missile in Pakistan," *Associated Press*, January 21, 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Chua Chin Hon, "US Govt May Hold Hambali Trial in Washington," *The Straits Times*, January 17, 2010.

<sup>83</sup> "US Rejects Indonesian Request to Extradite Terror Suspect Hambali," *BBC News*, January 20, 2010.

<sup>84</sup> Raymond Bonner and Carlos Conde, "U.S. and Philippines join forces to pursue terrorist leader," *New York Times*, July 23, 2005, p. A4. James Hookway, "Terror fight scores in Philippines," *Wall Street Journal Asia*, June 20, 2007, p. 1. Roland Ramos and Inday Espina-Varona, "Expanded (old) war theater, Philippine Graphic," November 12, 2007, p. 14-18.

<sup>85</sup> Simon Montlake, "U.S. troops in Philippines defy old stereotype," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 1, 2007, p. 7. Al Jacinto, "U.S., Filipino troops go on charm offensive," *Manila Times* (internet version), September 10, 2007.

targets. The responses of countries in the region to both the threat and to the U.S. reaction generally have varied with the intensity of their concerns about the threat to their own stability and domestic politics. Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines were quick to crack down on militant groups and share intelligence with the United States and Australia, whereas Indonesia began to do so only after attacks or arrests revealed the severity of the threat to its citizens. Once Indonesia came to view the threat as a threat to Indonesians and the Indonesian state, it too moved to suppress JI.

The United States – along with its ally, Australia – has encouraged, pushed for, and supported these local anti-terrorism efforts through several means, including funding and training Indonesia's elite counter-terrorist unit; deploying troops to the southern Philippines to advise the Philippine military in their fight against the violent Abu Sayyaf Group; launching a Regional Maritime Security Initiative to enhance security in the Straits of Malacca; increasing intelligence sharing operations; restarting military-military relations with Indonesia; and providing substantial aid for Indonesia and the Philippines. Also, since 2001, Thailand and the United States have substantially increased their anti-terrorism cooperation.

Combating anti-American terrorism in Southeast Asia has presented the Bush and Obama Administrations with a delicate foreign policy problem. Despite mutual interests in combating terrorism, Southeast Asian governments have had to balance these security concerns with domestic political considerations. Although proponents of violent, radical Islam remain a very small minority in Southeast Asia, many governments view increased American pressure and military presence in their region with concern because of the political sensitivity of the issue with both mainstream Islamic and secular nationalist groups. Such sensitivities are particularly strong in Indonesia and Malaysia, the region's two largest Muslim majority nations. Throughout the 2000s, the rise in anti-American sentiment propelled by both the U.S.-led invasion of and presence in Iraq and many Southeast Asian Muslims' perceptions of America's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as "blatantly pro-Israel" has presented difficulties for most governments contemplating an overt U.S. role in their internal security.<sup>86</sup> That said, secular nationalist political parties have reaffirmed their central place in Indonesian national politics and asserted their dominance over Islamist political parties.

While Southeast Asia has had a large degree of success in curtailing Islamist terrorist activity there may be limits on the extent to which lessons learned may be applicable in other parts of the Muslim world. One lesson that does appear to translate is that full commitment to fighting Islamist militants comes with the perception by Muslim states that these militants present a threat to their regime and people and not just to Western targets in their country or region. The moderate and tolerant aspect of Islam in Southeast Asia may predispose Southeast Asian states to view extreme forms of Islamic belief in a different light than they would in more conservative states in the Arab core of the Muslim world. Malaysia's moderate concept of Islam Hadhari and Malaysian leaders' strong condemnation of violence associated with fundamentalist belief, while at the same time embracing Islam, is one example. A further factor evident in Malaysia is the delicate balance between the Muslim community and the significant non-Muslim ethnic Chinese and Indian communities that reside there. Indonesia has shown that democracy and national secular government can coexist in a largely Muslim state. For these and other reasons the

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<sup>86</sup> Daljit Singh, "The Terrorist Threat in Southeast Asia," in Russell Heng and Denis Hew, eds., *Regional Outlook, 2003-2004* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003).

Southeast Asian experience in fighting terrorism may be more applicable to places such as Bangladesh than the more conservative Arab centre of Islam..

## **Al Qaeda's Global Strategy and Long Term Policy Implications<sup>87</sup>**

Overall, Al Qaeda leaders' statements from the mid-1990s through the present suggest that they see themselves and their followers as the armed vanguard of an international Islamist movement. Al Qaeda and many of its affiliates state a commitment to ending non-Muslim "interference" in the affairs of Muslims and to recasting predominantly Muslim societies according to narrow interpretations of Sunni Islam and related Islamic law. Statements from some Al Qaeda leaders advocate for a phased struggle, in which the initial goal is the expulsion of U.S. and foreign military forces from "Islamic lands" and proximate goals include the overthrow of "corrupt" regional leaders and the creation of governments that rule solely according *sharia* (Islamic law). Some Al Qaeda leaders also promote military confrontation with Israel and conflict with Shiite Muslims. In pursuit of these goals, leaders of Al Qaeda and its regional affiliates frequently make appeals for support based on a wide range of political positions and, at times, attempt to harness nationalist sentiment or manipulate local grievances to generate support for their agenda.

Although Osama Bin Laden's self-professed goal has been to "move, incite, and mobilize the [Islamic] nation"<sup>88</sup> until it reaches a revolutionary "ignition point,"<sup>89</sup> Al Qaeda leaders' statements and Al Qaeda's attacks to date appear largely to have failed to mobilize widespread support among Muslims. While global public opinion polling and media monitoring indicate that dissatisfaction with U.S. foreign policy has grown significantly in some predominantly Muslim societies, the sectarian rhetoric of some Al Qaeda affiliates and the persistence of Al Qaeda-inspired terrorist attacks that kill and maim Sunni and Shiite Muslim civilians have undermined Al Qaeda's appeal among some groups. Some experts also argue that the uncompromising, anti-democratic tone of many of the public statements released by Bin Laden, Al Zawahiri, and their regional supporters may be alienating Muslims who support the concept of secular or religious representative government.

Analysis of the statements issued by Al Qaeda leaders and affiliates since the mid-1990s suggests that these groups and individuals believe that characterizing their actions as religiously sanctioned, defensive reactions to external threats will increase tolerance of and support for their broader ideological program. Al Qaeda and its regional affiliates also appear to believe that the identification of limited political objectives and the suggestion that the fulfillment of those objectives will resolve their grievances may generate broader appeal than the group's underlying religious agenda. Nevertheless, the practical political and operational realities facing many Al Qaeda affiliates have often led these groups to take actions that have undermined their efforts to portray themselves as defenders of Muslims with limited objectives. For example:

- In December 2004, Bin Laden identified the conflict in Iraq as "a golden and unique opportunity" for jihadists to engage and defeat the United States, and he

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<sup>87</sup> Prepared by Christopher M. Blanchard, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs, January 2010.

<sup>88</sup> "Usama Bin Ladin's Message to Iraq," *Al-Jazirah Television*, February 11, 2003.

<sup>89</sup> "Bin Ladin Interviewed on Jihad Against U.S.," *Al Quds al Arabi*, November 27, 1996.

characterized the insurgency in Iraq as the central battle in a “Third World War, which the Crusader-Zionist coalition began against the Islamic nation.”<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, several strategic choices made by Al Qaeda’s affiliates in Iraq undermined their support among key groups, specifically their decisions to stoke sectarian conflict, to rigidly enforce religious doctrine in some areas, and to target the leaders and citizens of some Sunni Muslim communities. Each of these decisions contributed to the significant attrition the group has suffered from 2007 onward at the hands of Iraqi security forces, the government’s Sunni allies among the Awakening and Sons of Iraq movements, and the United States military.

- Similarly, affiliates of Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia initially oriented their attacks against foreign interests in the kingdom during their 2003-2007 campaign, in line with Al Qaeda leaders’ rhetoric that had long targeted the U.S. military presence and other outside influences. Saudi security officials believe that once local Al Qaeda affiliates shifted the focus of their attacks away from foreign targets and onto local security forces, Al Qaeda created an opportunity for the government to directly engage and eliminate the group. In addition to carrying out more robust security operations, the government launched a campaign that used nationalist sentiment to undermine popular support for the group by highlighting Al Qaeda attacks against security officers.
- Since 2006, Al Shabaab fighters in Somalia who affiliate themselves with Al Qaeda have rallied support from some Somalis opposed to external intervention in Somalia and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). However, Al Shabaab threats against the United Nations World Food Program have shut down humanitarian aid delivery, which has the potential to jeopardize the survival of many Somalis by exacerbating the food insecurity in the country.
- In Southeast Asia, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network’s 2002 bomb attack in Bali, Indonesia that killed over 200 people led the Indonesian government to reverse course and undertake a concerted effort to track, arrest, and kill JI leaders, as well as to increase anti-terrorist cooperation with the United States and Australia. The ensuing crackdown in Indonesia and other countries appears to have degraded JI’s capabilities, particularly its more militant factions, which were most closely associated with Al Qaeda. Since the mid-2000s, JI appears to be taking direction from more “bureaucratic” elements that oppose the militants’ violent tactics, at least in the short term.

Many observers argue that the success or failure of U.S. and allied counterterrorism efforts are tied to decisions made by regional governments and publics about the relative importance of combating Al Qaeda operatives, affiliates, and ideologues within their own societies. Recent events suggest that U.S. and allied counterterrorism policies can be successful when they capitalize on Al Qaeda actions and messages that alienate current or potential supporters. Similarly, recent events also suggest that Al Qaeda members seek to capitalize on U.S. and allied policies that hurt or are unpopular among target local audiences. These complex dynamics and calculations are likely to continue to challenge international decision makers and require unique approaches in each of the regional contexts described above. Counterterrorism approaches that work in one theater or political context may prove counterproductive when applied elsewhere.

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<sup>90</sup> U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Report-FEA20041227000762, December 27, 2004.



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